



## Joy To Fill Your Heart by Val-Creative

**Category:** Stranger Things, 2016

**Genre:** Friendship, Romance

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin H., Eleven/Jane H., Max M.

**Pairings:** Eleven/Jane H./Max M.

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2017-12-29 13:46:50

**Updated:** 2017-12-29 13:46:50

**Packaged:** 2019-12-17 03:22:59

**Rating:** K+

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 1,223

**Publisher:** [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

**Summary:** El looks so much older, with those dark, soft curls tumbling over her shoulders, with no more baby fat to her cheeks and all slender, prominent angles. God, why did you make me a lesbian, Max groans to herself. Women are so perfect and magical and stunning in every way. It's unfair. /Canon AU. Futureverse. Elmax. Oneshot.

## Joy To Fill Your Heart

Max doesn't remember Christmas being anything special as she grew up.

They were too *poor* for the brand new toys or electronics.

Even getting a pair of clothes could be too expensive sometimes and Max had to settle for the hand-me-downs from her cousins. All of her cousins had been boys around her age who played sports or video games, so no dresses or bows or skirts. Not that she minded.

Things got worse after her mom divorced her dad while she was 11. Martin Mayfield discovered Susan was having an affair with Neil Hargrove and they filed their paperwork quickly, despite being heated and argumentative, trying to decide who would have custody of Max.

She doesn't remember any decorations or a Christmas tree, any multicolored lights or baked gingerbread men — and of course, no presents.

It got to be a normal thing. Max suffered through tensed, glaring silence during those home-cooked dinners, listening to Billy and her stepdad occasionally yelling at each other. After moving to Hawkins, Max vanished on each Christmas Eve, sneaking to the Wheeler's home where her friends would gather to hang out and play.

There's no sign of Mr. or Mrs. Wheeler anywhere. Green-and-red plaid wrapping paper covers the huge stack of Christmas presents underneath Mike's freshly cut pine tree.

Max kicks up her skateboard and shivers on the doormat, lowering her face to wipe the frozen snot on her upper lip. Her eyes red-rimmed. "Are you okay?" El asks, when the other girl walks inside and pulls off her snow-crusted jacket. For a moment, Max glances

around, completely thrown off.

El has barely *acknowledged* her in the last month since they met face-to-face.

"Yeah..."

It's the only way she knows how to answer — with a lie.

(Max knows nobody *actually* cares about what happens when she goes home, and it's none of their business anyway.)

The yellow-golden light in the foyer makes the silvery tinsel in El's dark curls glimmer and glow. She looks at Max with the same featureless expression, but her lips tighten together. Max's eyes widen as El grabs onto Max's hand, holding on firmly, warmly.

"Friends don't lie," she murmurs.

Max *hates* the tears burning and falling, and the lump developing in her throat. "So we're friends now?" Max replies, purposely spitting the word *friends* back into El's direction venomously. "That's it? Just whenever *you* felt like it?"

A rueful but understanding look hits El, and Max doesn't want to see it right now. She doesn't want to see her.

Max's hand jerks away.

The snow gets thicker, blowing with a flurry into Max's blotchy, reddened face.

She rides her skateboard off the Wheeler's driveway, fiercely swallowing down any urge to cry or scream out.

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Years pass.

Max gets to visit her father in California off and on during high

school. He remarried a woman named Rachel Hammond who was currently pregnant with twin boys. The due date is Max's birthday. She doesn't have to *pretend* to smile while with her step mom and dad — that's the nice part. They're good to her.

She moves back to California after turning 16.

Lucas and Dustin and Will call her during the weekends, asking when she's coming to visit, and sometimes Mike and Steve say hi. The person she *wants* to hear from, as much as Max remembers being infuriated and hurt, she's rarely there.

They invite her to a Christmas party at Lucas's apartment, right outside of Indianapolis. She arrives to the smells of turkey and garlic and cherry cordial, removing her boots by the front door. Will greets her with a single hand-wave across the hallway, grinning and practically hip-to-hip with Mike drowning himself in eggnog.

Max can hear Lucas and Dustin arguing over what CD to put in next, the further in she gets.

There's a gigantic pine-garland over the opening of the living room, selected with red baubles and white, twinkling lights. She feels so shabby in her plain, emerald sweater and jeans. "*Sorry*—" Max blurts out, colliding into someone else.

Her heart jumps suddenly into her mouth.

El looks so much *older*, with those dark, soft curls tumbling over her shoulders, with no more baby fat to her cheeks and all slender, prominent angles.

*Tinsel.*

This time, there's golden pieces of tinsel sewn into her bright, fuzzy red sweater. "I should have been looking where I was going," El says low and murmury, nodding. She even talks different.

Max glances her over without saying anything, opening her mouth wider than before. She tries to stop staring obviously at El's ruby-glossed lips.

"Nice... *antlers*."

El reaches up to the top of her head, where the felt, brown reindeer antlers on a headband sit. "Thanks," she laughs, and Max feels woozy. A good kind of woozy. Like she's just waking up. She didn't know anyone could laugh like they were made of fairybells or angel's dust... ..

*God, why did you make me a lesbian*, Max groans to herself. *Women are so perfect and magical and stunning in every way. It's unfair.*

Dustin steps out, hooting and clapping his hands together.

"Look what we got here!" he shouts, directing everyone's attention at the party, much to Max's immediate displeasure. "Two lovely ladies under the mistletoe! Any volunteers?!"

"Thanks, but... no thanks!" Max shouts back, half-grimacing and half-smiling, taking El's shoulder while everyone else cheers or giggles.

She's about to lead them away from this dreaded heteronormative mistletoe, when Max catches El's eyes roaming her face, slow and dreamy.

*Oh...*

Daring to hope, Max reaches out, carefully tucking a strand of El's hair over her ear, watching in amazement. A hot, rosy flush appears to the other woman's cheeks and neck. Oh, *shit*. Yes, yes, absolutely yes — Max's brain screams internally. This could happen.

"I should have been nicer to you," El whispers bashfully, twisting her fingers in front of her. "I was... jealous that my friends replaced me."

This time, Max rubs her blushing cheek, looking away.

"Umm, well... I'm pretty sure there's nobody else in the world like you, so..." she trails off, and whines a little against El's mouth when the other woman kisses her, fiercely but slow. A hint of strawberry mingles in El's ruby-gloss. And on her bare, pale skin — Max feels it like a thrum of *electricity*. Something otherworldly.

Dustin mock-scoffs in the background, playfully raising a hand and shooing them.

"NEVERMIND I GUESS!"

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*Stranger Things is not mine. WE ARE SUPER CLOSE TO 2018. IT'S UNREAL. This whole year has been... something. But hey, at least we had S2 of Stranger Things. I'm a big fan of almost all pairings on this show, but I got a soft spot for femslash anyways and for Elmax. Kris (babybyelers on Tumblr) and I decided to collab an idea and she's doing another in-universe related version of this but with Byeler. Anyway, hope you guys loved this! :D Any thoughts/comments appreciated!*